

# On Colombia

Noam Chomsky

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As I write, I have just received the most recent of the regular notices from the Jesuit-based human rights organization Justicia y Paz in Bogotá, directed by the courageous priest Father Javier Giraldo, one of Colombia's leading defenders of human rights, at great personal risk. This notice reports the assassination of an Afro-Colombian human rights activist, Yolanda Cerón Delgado, as she was leaving the pastoral social office near the police station. Justicia y Paz reports that it is a typical paramilitary operation, in association with the government security forces and police. Regrettably, the event is not remarkable.

A few weeks earlier there had been an unusual event: a rare concession of responsibility. The Colombian attorney general's office reported that the army had lied when it claimed that three dead union leaders were Marxist rebels killed in a firefight. They had, in fact, been assassinated by the army. Reporting the concession, the *New York Times* observes that "Colombia is by far the world's most dangerous country for union members, with 94 killed last year and 47 slain by Aug. 25 this year," mostly killed "by right-wing paramilitary leaders linked to rogue army units." The term "rogue" is interpretation, not description.

The worldwide total of murdered union leaders for 2003 was reported to be 123, three-quarters of them in Colombia. The proportions have been consistent for some time. Not only has Colombia been the most dangerous place for labor leaders anywhere in the world (insofar as statistics are available), but it has been more dangerous than the rest of the world combined. To take another year, on Human Rights Day, 10 December 2002, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions issued its annual Survey of Trade Union Rights. It reported that by then over 150 trade unionists had been murdered in Colombia that year. The final figure for 2002 reported by the International Labor Organization in its 2003 annual survey was 184 trade unionists assassinated in Colombia, 85% of the total worldwide in 2002. The figures are similar in other recent years.

The assassinations are attributed primarily to paramilitary or security forces, a distinction with little apparent difference. Their connections are so close that Human Rights Watch refers to the paramilitaries as the "Sixth Division" of the Colombian army, along with its official five Divisions. As Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and other human rights organizations have documented, political murders in Colombia – of which assassinations of union activists constitute a small fraction – are carried out with almost complete impunity. They call for an end to impunity,

and termination of US military aid as long as the atrocities continue with scarcely a tap on the wrist. The military aid continues to flow in abundance, with pretexts that are an embarrassment.

It remains to be seen whether the September 2004 concession of the army murders leads to any action. If the past is a guide, nothing will happen beyond the lowest levels, though the evidence for higher military and civilian responsibility is substantial. There have been a few occasions when major massacres were seriously investigated. The most significant of these was the Trujillo massacre in 1990, when more than 60 people were murdered in a particularly brutal army operation, their bodies cut to pieces with chain saws. Under the initiative of Justicia y Paz, the Samper government agreed to allow an independent commission of investigation, including government representatives, which published a report in shocking detail, identifying the military officer in charge, Major Alirio Urueña Jaramillo. Ten years later, Father Giraldo reported that nothing had been done: "Not one of the guilty has been sanctioned," he said, "even though many more victims have come to light in subsequent years." US military aid not only continued to flow, but was increased.

By the time of the Trujillo massacre Colombia had the worst human rights record in the hemisphere – not because atrocities in Colombia had markedly increased, but because atrocities by El Salvador and other US clients had declined. Colombia became by far the leading recipient of US military aid and training, replacing El Salvador. By 1999, Colombia became the leading recipient of US military aid worldwide (excepting Israel-Egypt, a separate category always), replacing Turkey – not because atrocities in Colombia had increased, but because Turkish atrocities had declined. Through the 1990s, Turkey had conducted its brutal counterinsurgency war against its domestic Kurdish population, leading to tens of thousands of deaths and probably millions driven from their devastated villages, many surviving somehow in condemned buildings in miserable slums in Istanbul, in caves in the walls of the semi-official Kurdish capital of Diyarbakir, or wherever they can. The atrocities were accompanied by vicious torture, destruction of lands and forests, just about any barbaric crime imaginable. Arms from the US came in an increasing flow, amounting to about 80% of Turkey's arms. In the single year 1997, Clinton sent more arms to Turkey than the cumulative total for the entire Cold War period prior to the onset of the counterinsurgency campaign. But by 1999, the campaign had achieved "success," and Colombia took over first place. It also retains its position as "by far the biggest humanitarian catastrophe of the Western hemisphere," as UN Undersecretary for Humanitarian Affairs Jan Egeland reiterated at a press conference in New York in May 2004.

There is nothing particularly novel about the relation between atrocious human rights violations and US aid. On the contrary, it is a rather consistent correlation. The leading US academic specialist on human rights in Latin America, Lars Schoultz, found in a 1981 study that US aid "has tended to flow disproportionately to Latin American governments which torture their citizens,... to the hemisphere's relatively egregious violators of fundamental human rights." That includes military aid, is independent of need, and runs through the Carter period. In another academic study, Latin Americanist Martha Huggins reviewed data for Latin America suggesting that "the more foreign police aid given [by the US], the more brutal and less democratic the police institutions and their governments become." Economist Edward Herman found the same correlation between US military aid and state terror worldwide, but also carried out another study that gave a plausible explanation. US aid, he found, correlated closely with improvement in the climate for business operations, as one would expect. And in US dependencies it turns out with fair regularity, and for understandable reasons, that the climate for profitable investment and other business

operations is improved by killing union activists, torture and murder of peasants, assassination of priests and human rights activists, and so on. There is, then, a secondary correlation between US aid and egregious human rights violations.

There have been no similar studies since, to my knowledge, presumably because the conclusions are too obvious to merit close inquiry.

The Latin American Catholic Church became a particular target when the Bishops adopted the “preferential option for the poor” in the 1960s and ‘70s, and priests, nuns, and lay workers began to establish base communities where peasants read the Gospels and drew from their teachings lessons about elementary human rights, and worse yet, even began to organize to defend their rights. The horrendous Reagan decade, commemorated with reverence and awe in the United States, is remembered rather differently in the domains where his administration waged the “war on terror” that it declared on coming to office in 1981: El Salvador, for example, where the decade is framed by the assassination in March 1980 of an Archbishop who had become a “voice for the voiceless” and the assassination of six leading Latin American intellectuals, Jesuit priests, in November 1989, by an elite force armed and trained by the US which had left a shocking trail of blood and torture in earlier years. The (now renamed) School of the Americas, which has trained Latin American officers, including some of the continent’s most outstanding torturers and mass murderers, takes pride in having helped to “defeat liberation theology,” one of the “talking points” in its public relations efforts. Such matters arouse little interest in the West, and are scarcely known apart from specialists and the solidarity movements. The reaction would be somewhat different if anything remotely similar had taken place in those years in the domains of the official enemy.

The basic principles of state terror are explained by Schoultz in a standard scholarly work on US foreign policy and human rights in Latin America. Referring to the neo-Nazi “national security states” imposed or backed by the U.S. from the 1960s, Schoultz observes that the goal of state terror was “to destroy permanently a perceived threat to the existing structure of socioeconomic privilege by eliminating the political participation of the numerical majority..., [the] popular classes.” All of this is very much in accord with the basic principles of the Counterinsurgency (CI) doctrines that have been core elements of U.S. foreign policy since World War II, as Doug Stokes reviews, doctrines that remain quite consistent while pretexts change, as does their implementation, as again Stokes reviews in illuminating detail.

Colombia’s rise to first place as a recipient of US military aid in 1999, replacing Turkey, was particularly striking at that particular moment. The transfer, which passed without notice in the mainstream, came right in the midst of a chorus of self-adulation among Western elites and praise for their leaders that may have been without historical precedent. Respected commentators gazed with awe on “the idealistic New World bent on ending inhumanity” as it entered a “noble phase” of its foreign policy with a “saintly glow,” acting from “altruism” alone and following “principles and values” in a sharp break from the past history of the world as it led the way to establishing a “new norm of humanitarian intervention.” The jewel in the diadem, opening a new era of world history, was the bombing of Serbia in 1999. Whatever one thinks of the crimes attributed to Serbia in Kosovo prior to the bombing (which, as anticipated, led to radical escalation of the crimes), they do not compare with the unnoticed actions of Western clients, not only the leading recipients of US military aid but others as well: East Timor to take a striking example from those very months, while US-UK support continued as atrocities once again escalated well beyond anything reported at the time in Kosovo by official Western sources.

As is well-known, the “drug war” provides the recent justification for support for the security forces and (indirectly) their paramilitary associates in Colombia. With the same justification, US-trained forces, and mercenaries from US corporations that employ ex-military officers, carry out “fumigation,” meaning chemical warfare operations that destroy crops and livestock and drive peasants from their devastated lands. Meanwhile the street price of drugs in the US does not rise, implying that the effects on production are slight, and the prison population in the US explodes to the highest recorded level in the world, far beyond other industrial societies, largely as a consequence of the “drug war.” It has long been understood that the most effective way to deal with the drug problem – which is in the U.S., not in Colombia – is education and treatment, and the least effective by far is out-of-country operations, such as chemical warfare to destroy crops and other CI operations. Funding is dramatically in inverse relation to effectiveness, and is unaffected by failure to achieve the claimed goals.

The facts, hard to miss, raise some obvious questions. One of the leading academic authorities on Colombia, Charles Bergquist, remarks that “a provocative case can be made that US drug policy contributes effectively to the control of an ethnically distinct and economically deprived underclass at home and serves US economic and security interests abroad.” Many criminologists and international affairs analysts might regard this as a considerable understatement. Faith in the proclaimed doctrines becomes still harder to sustain when we attend to the relation between U.S. resort to subversion and violence and increase in drug production back to World War II, documented in rich detail by Alfred McCoy, Peter Dale Scott and others, recurring right at this moment in Afghanistan. As Scott observes, reviewing many cases of U.S. military intervention and subversion, with each “there has been a dramatic boost to international drug-trafficking, including a rise in U.S. drug consumption.” At the same time, the lives of Colombian campesinos, indigenous people, and Afro-Colombians are destroyed with the solemn claim that it is imperative to carry out these crimes to prevent drug production and use.

In extenuation, it could be noted that fostering drug production is hardly a US innovation: the British empire relied crucially on the most extraordinary narcotrafficking enterprise in world history, with horrifying effects in China and in India, much of which was conquered in an effort to gain a monopoly on opium production.

The official pretexts are confronted with massive counterevidence, and supported by no confirming evidence (apart from the declarations of leaders, which invariably speak of benign intent and are therefore uninformative, whatever their source). Suppose, nevertheless, that we accept official doctrine, and assume that the goal of the US-run CI operations in Colombia, including the chemical warfare that is ruining the peasant society, is to eradicate drugs. And let’s also, for the sake of argument, put aside the fact that US subversion and aggression continue to lead to increase of production and use of drugs. On these charitable assumptions, US operations in Colombia are truly scandalous. That seems transparent. To bring the point out more clearly, consider the fact, not in dispute, that deaths from tobacco vastly exceed those from all hard drugs combined. Furthermore, hard drugs harm the user, while tobacco harms others – not as much, to be sure, as alcohol, which is heavily implicated in killing of others (automobile accidents, alcohol-induced violence, etc.), but significantly. Deaths from “passive smoking” probably exceed those from all hard drugs combined, and “soft drugs” that are severely criminalized, like Marijuana, while doubtless harmful (like coffee, red meat, etc.), are not known to have significant lethal effects. Furthermore, while the Colombian cartels are not permitted to place billboards in Times Square New York, or run ads on TV, to induce children and other vulnerable sectors of

the population to use cocaine and heroin, there are no such barriers against advertising for the far more lethal tobacco-based products, and in fact countries have been threatened with serious trade sanctions if they violate the sacred principles of “free trade” by attempting to regulate such practices. An elementary conclusion follows at once: if the U.S. is entitled to carry out chemical warfare targeting poor peasants in Colombia, then Colombia, and China, and many others are surely entitled to carry out far more extensive chemical warfare programs targeting agribusiness production in North Carolina and Kentucky. Comment should be unnecessary.

Colombia has violent history, in large part rooted in the fact that its great natural wealth and opportunities are monopolized by narrow privileged and often quite brutal sectors, while much of the population lives in misery and endures severe repression. Colombia’s tragic history took a new turn, however, in the early 1960s, when U.S. intervention became a much more significant factor – not that it had been marginal before, for example, when Theodore Roosevelt stole part of Colombia for a canal that was of great importance for U.S. economic and strategic interests. In 1962, John F. Kennedy in effect shifted the mission of the Latin American military from “hemispheric defense,” a residue of World War II, to “internal security,” a euphemism for war against the domestic population.

There were significant effects throughout Latin America. One consequence in Colombia, as Stokes reviews, was the official US recommendation to rely on paramilitary terror against “known Communist proponents.” The effects on Colombia were described by the president of the Colombian Permanent Committee for Human Rights, the distinguished diplomat Alfredo Vázquez Carrizosa. Beyond the crimes that are institutionalized in the “dual structure of a prosperous minority and an impoverished, excluded majority, with great differences in wealth, income, and access to political participation,” he wrote, the Kennedy initiatives led to an “exacerbation of violence by external factors,” as Washington “took great pains to transform our regular armies into counterinsurgency brigades, accepting the new strategy of the death squads,” decisions that “ushered in what is known in Latin America as the National Security Doctrine.” This was not “defense against an external enemy, but a way to make the military establishment the masters of the game...[with] the right to combat the internal enemy, as set forth in the Brazilian doctrine, the Argentine doctrine, the Uruguayan doctrine, and the Colombian doctrine: it is the right to fight and to exterminate social workers, trade unionists, men and women who are not supportive of the establishment, and who are assumed to be communist extremists” – a term with wide coverage in CI lingo, including human rights activists, priests organizing peasants, labor leaders, others seeking to address the “dual structure” by non-violent democratic means, and of course the great mass of victims of the dual structure, if they dare to raise their heads.

The policy was certainly not new. The horrifying example of Guatemala is sufficient to show that. Nor was it restricted to Latin America. In many ways, the early postwar CI operations in Greece (with some 150,000 dead) and South Korea (with a death toll of 100,000) set the pattern long before. Apart from its Guatemala atrocities, the Eisenhower administration had overthrown the parliamentary government of Iran and restored the brutal rule of the Shah in order to bar Iran from taking control of its own resources, and in 1958, had carried out some of the most extreme postwar clandestine operations in its effort to undermine the parliamentary government of Indonesia, which was becoming dangerously democratic, and to split off the outer islands, where most of the resources were – just to mention a few examples. But there was a qualitative change in the early 1960s.

In Latin America, the Kennedy administration orchestrated a military coup in Brazil, which took place shortly after Kennedy's assassination, installing the first of the National Security States, complete with large-scale torture, destruction of popular organizations and any vestige of democracy, and intense repression. It was welcomed in Washington as a "democratic rebellion," "a great victory for free world," which prevented a "total loss to West of all South American Republics" and should "create a greatly improved climate for private investments." The democratic revolution carried out by the neo-Nazi generals was "the single most decisive victory of freedom in the mid-twentieth century," Kennedy's Ambassador Lincoln Gordon held, "one of the major turning points in world history" in this period. Shortly after, the Indonesian problem was dealt with successfully as General Suharto took over in a military coup, with a "staggering mass slaughter," as the *New York Times* described the outcome, "a gleam of light in Asia," on the words of their leading liberal commentator, James Reston. As was known at once, the death toll was immense, perhaps half a million or many more, mostly landless peasants. The threat of excessive democracy that had troubled the Eisenhower administration was overcome, with the destruction of the major mass-based political party in the country, which "had won widespread support not as a revolutionary party [despite its name: PKI, Indonesian Communist Party] but as an organization defending the interests of the poor within the existing system," Australian Indonesia specialist Harold Crouch observes, developing a "mass base among the peasantry" through its "vigor in defending the interests of the...poor." Western euphoria was irrepressible, and continued as Suharto compiled one of the worst human rights records of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, also invading East Timor and carrying out a near-genocidal slaughter, with firm support from the U.S. and U.K., among others, to the bloody end in late 1999. The gleam of light in Indonesia also eliminated one of the pillars of the hated non-aligned movement. A second was eliminated when Israel destroyed Nasser's army in 1967, firmly establishing the U.S.-Israel alliance that has persisted since.

In Latin America, the Brazilian coup had a domino effect, as the National Security Doctrine spread throughout the continent with varying degrees of US initiative, but constant and decisive support, however terrible the consequences. One example is "the first 9-11," in Chile, September 11, 1973, when General Pinochet's forces bombed the Presidential palace and demolished Latin America's oldest and most vibrant democracy, establishing a regime of torture and repression thanks primarily to the secret police organization DINA that US military intelligence compared to the KGB and the Gestapo - while Washington firmly supported the regime. The official death toll of the first 9-11 was 3200, which would correspond to about 50,000 in the US; the actual toll was doubtless much higher. Pinochet's DINA soon moved to integrate Latin American dictatorships in the international state terrorist program "Operation Condor," which killed and tortured mercilessly within the countries and branched out to terrorist operations in Europe and the U.S. The evil genius, Pinochet, was greatly honored, by Reagan and Thatcher in particular, but quite generally. The assassination of a respected diplomat in Washington was going too far, however, and Operation Condor was wound down. The worst atrocities, in Argentina, were yet to come, along with the expansion of the state terror to Central America in the 1980s, leaving hundreds of thousands of corpses and four countries in ruins, along with a condemnation of the U.S. by the World Court for its "unlawful use of force" (in lay terms, international terrorism), backed by two (vetoed) Security Council resolutions, after which Washington escalated the terror to new heights. Colombia's travail was part of a far broader picture.

U.S. terror operations in Central America were accompanied by expansion of the drug trade, the usual concomitant of international terrorism, which relies crucially on criminal elements and untraceable financial resources – meaning narcotics. Washington’s mobilization of radical Islamists in Afghanistan, in collaboration with Pakistani intelligence and other allies, led to a far larger explosion of drug production and narcotrafficking, with lethal effects in the region and far beyond. These U.S. policies proceeded side by side with the “drug war” at home and in Colombia, no embarrassing questions raised. Drug production and distribution are rapidly increasing in Afghanistan and Kosovo, consistent with the traditional pattern, while Colombian peasants suffer and die from chemical warfare attacks and are driven to urban slums where they can rot alongside millions of others in one of the world’s largest refugee catastrophes. And in the U.S., drugs remain available with no change, the measures that are known to be effective in dealing with drug problems (let alone the social conditions in which they arise) are scarcely pursued, and victims flow from urban slums to the flourishing prison-industrial complex, as some criminologists call it.

The mass murderers and torturers of the Latin American National Security States have sometimes had to face at least public inquiries into their crimes. Some have even faced the bar of justice, though nothing remotely like what would be appropriate to such crimes by Western standards. Others, however, are completely immune. In the major study of Operation Condor, journalist/analyst John Dinges observes that “Only in the United States, whose diplomats, intelligence, and military were so intimately intertwined with the military dictators and their operational subordinates, has there been judicial silence on the crimes of the Condor years.” The United States, he continues, “conferred on itself a kind of de facto amnesty even more encompassing than that enjoyed by its Latin American allies: no truth commissions or any other kind of official investigation was established to look into the human collateral damage of the many proxy wars that were supported in Latin America or elsewhere” – and, we may add, actual wars, including horrendous crimes, shielded by the same self-declared amnesty.

The powerful are, typically, immune to prosecution or even serious inquiry, even memory for that matter. Only their citizens can end such crimes, and the far more terrible crimes that flow from permanent immunity.

As Stokes reviews in convincing detail, U.S. policies persist while pretexts and tactics shift as circumstances require. Sometimes the basic principles are frankly stated. Thus diplomatic historian Gerald Haines (also senior historian of the CIA) introduces his study of “the Americanization of Brazil” by observing that “Following World War II the United States assumed, out of self-interest, responsibility for the welfare of the world capitalist system” – which does not mean the welfare of the people of the system, as events were to prove, not surprisingly. The enemy was “Communism.” The reasons were outlined by a prestigious study group of the Woodrow Wilson Foundation and the National Planning Association in a comprehensive 1955 study on the political economy of U.S. foreign policy: the primary threat of Communism, the study concluded, is the economic transformation of the Communist powers “in ways that reduce their willingness and ability to complement the industrial economies of the West.” It makes good sense, then, that prospects of independent development should be regarded as a serious danger, to be pre-empted by violence if necessary. That is particularly true if the errant society shows signs of success in terms that might be meaningful to others suffering from similar oppression and injustice. In that case it becomes a “virus” that might “infect others,” a “rotten apple” that might “spoil the barrel,”

in the terminology of top planners, describing the real domino theory, not the version fabricated to frighten the domestic public into obedience.

The Cold War itself had similar characteristics, taking on a life of its own because of scale. That is implicitly recognized by leading establishment scholars, notably John Lewis Gaddis, regarded as the dean of Cold War scholarship. He plausibly traces the origins of the Cold War to 1917, when Russia broke free of its relations of semi-colonial dependency on the West and sought to pursue an independent course. Gaddis articulates fundamental principles perceptively when he regards the very existence of the Bolshevik regime as a form of aggression, so that the intervention of the Western powers was actually self-defense, undertaken “in response to a profound and potentially far-reaching intervention by the new Soviet government in the internal affairs, not just of the West, but of virtually every country in the world,” namely, “the Revolution’s challenge – which could hardly have been more categorical – to the very survival of the capitalist order.” Change of the social order in Russia and announcement of intentions to spread the model elsewhere is aggression that elicits invasion as justified self-defense.

The threat that Russia could prove to be a “virus” was very real, Woodrow Wilson and Lloyd George recognized, not only in the colonial world but even in the rich industrial societies. Those concerns remained very much alive into the 1960s, we know from the internal record. It should come as no surprise, then, that these thoughts are reiterated over and over, as when Kennedy-Johnson high-level planners warned that the “very existence” of the Castro regime in Cuba is “successful defiance” of U.S. policies going back to the Monroe Doctrine, so that the “terrors of the earth” must be visited on Cuba, to borrow the phrase of historian and Kennedy confidant Arthur Schlesinger, describing the prime goal of Robert Kennedy, who was assigned responsibility for the terrorist operations.

Colombia, again, falls well within a much more general pattern, though in each case, the horrors that are endured are terrible in their own special and indescribable ways.



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